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ABSTRACT

English teachers should prepare students for the act of writing, through prewriting experiences that provide for motivation, collection of data, and ordering of data. Group brainstorming relating to a given topic is helpful in generating ideas for writing; individual brainstorming may be used by students in recalling and listing images. Class and small-group discussions can also generate prewriting data. To build upon observational skills, teachers may encourage the prewriting habit of journal keeping; journal notation is a helpful step in ordering responses to experience. Other prewriting experiences include sensory perception experiments, note taking, creative drama, and the writing of free verse. Student/teacher conferences can also be valuable, when held as soon as students have their data and before they order their material and freeze their ideas into form. (GW)

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Learning to Juggle Oranges: The Pre-Writing Experience

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Learning to Juggle Oranges: The Pre-Writing Experience

We English teachers rarely practice what we teach. Aside from the occasional letter--usually substituted for with a phone call--we seldom write at all--no poem, no essay, no great American novel. But if we can remember our last attempt at written creativity--that irate letter to the local paper, or the article we submitted for the English Journal--we might examine how we went about the writing process. We probably stewed and fretted quite a bit, especially that journal article. We didn't take any notes, but as we drove to and from school, or made our rounds of shopping, or cooking, or gardening, or walking the dog, something was going on--if not mentally, then at least viscerally--so that when we finally sat down before our typewriter, the fingers moved and the seemingly unpremeditated act was soon committed.

Of course, we all know how that happens. However reluctant we are to write, the conditioned habits of an academic lifetime come into play, and as we procrastinate and try to placate our nervous stomach with hot milk or a Scotch and soda, our reflexes are busily reviewing, selecting, shaping, toning the act-to-be, the communication we will ultimately write. For better or for worse, our pre-writing experience is often a semi-conscious, if not unconscious operation of composing mechanisms we once learned to use as conscious tools in our long apprenticeship as students and writers. To compare ourselves to our own students, we might well try to perform a new skill. If I had one orange with me I might well be able to hold it in my left hand, as I would a tennis ball, and throw it up and then catch it with my right.

But if I were to add a second and then a third orange, you would see a sorry, and very short act of juggling. Driven by some masochistic desire, I have lately started to learn Spanish, and the resultant juggling is almost as disastrous as my orange flip as I search for the word, the inflection, the pronunciation, the word order.

Which all means what as we turn to student writing? The answer, I hope is obvious. You don't state, as the bell is ringing for the end of the class period, "And for tomorrow, write me a 300 word theme on any topic you choose." True, students will occasionally be asked to write timed impromptus--on state examinations, and for the NCTE Achievement Awards, for example--but in general, we will not ask the becoming writer to perform a juggling act for which he is not yet conditioned. In almost every instance then, we will provide the pre-writing experience.

What do we mean by pre-writing experience? Very simplistically, we mean anything which helps to prepare the student for the act of writing--motivation, collection of data, the ordering of data, Anything which directs the student's attention to one or more aspects of the communication formula: Who says what to whom through which medium for what purpose and with what expected effect? Therefore, anything which makes the student consider the <u>who</u> or <u>persona</u> of his anticipated writing process; the <u>what</u>, or the <u>message</u>; the <u>whom</u>, or the <u>audience</u>; the <u>medium</u>, or the <u>genre</u>--written or non-linear; the <u>purpose</u>, or <u>objective</u>; and the anticipated and pre-judged <u>effect</u> or <u>result</u>.

Brainstorming

With my juggling act in mind, I would suggest that the most basic and productive type of pre-writing would be that which requires proficiency with but one orange at a time, such as oral brainstorming or discussion. With the first, students call out words or phrases which relate to the topic. For "Childhood Revisited," you might expect: walking with my father, my bratty little brother, visiting Aunt Mabel, picking out candy at the corner store, castor oil, TV cartoons, etc. These could be tape recorded, or written by two alternating class secretaries, but in no case would the chore of writing be inflicted upon the brainstormers. There would be no impedence between the recall of the student and the gradual collection of data. Nor would the teacher allow any value judgments during the process, nor would any ordering of data be encouraged at this initial stage.

Another type of brainstorming combines individualized student data collecting with initial transcription by the student himself. After the first snowstorm of the year, the teacher may ask students to recall imagery they noted on the way to school, or students may be asked to look out the classroom window and jot down images of sight. To direct students toward specific imagery, the teacher might well have preceded this exercise with class attention to such a poem as May Swenson's "Snow in New York,"[1] or better yet, her "By Morning,"[2] a puzzle poem which students would surely guess in the contextual excitement of the first snow of the season.

1. May Swenson, To Mix with Time. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, p. 47.

2. Ibid., p. 107.

BY MORNING

Some for everyone
  plenty

  and more coming

Fresh dainty airily arriving
  everywhere at once

Transparent at first
  each faint slice
  slow soundlessly tumbling

  then quickly thickly a gracious fleece
  will spread like youth like wheat
  over the city

Each building will be a hill
  all sharps made round

  dark worn noisy narrows made still
  wide flat clean spaces

Streets will be fields
  cars be fumbling sheep

A deep bright harvest will be seeded
  in a night

By morning we'll be children
  feeding on manna

  a new loaf on every doorsill

As they list their images some students will want to make connections between items, and we will have to decide whether or nor to discourage any process, however legitimate and constructive, which might tend to interfere with the basic data gathering. Once the students have exhausted possibilities for sensory data, however, the teacher will encourage them to find connections between images or to expand them into grammatical units. One of my junior high school teachers restricts choice of data by moving the students into the writing of a haiku. This subtly conditions the class in the good research habit of the necessary "throw away," the discarding of material, however good, which does not fit into the ultimate plan of the poem, or the research paper.

Another excellent brainstorming technique is included in the Hawaii English project.[1] With the class divided into small groups, each student writes a word on a piece of paper and then passes the paper to the student to the left. Continuing this process, each person in the group adds a word until the paper is returned to the initial brainstormer who then tries to make relationships. This pre-writing activity could be preceded by such motivational exercise as listening to music or to a story or poetry.

1. Ms. Jeanine Rounds, University of Hawaii, Honolulu. Roundtable discussion, Seattle, 11 March 1977.

Class Discussion

Class discussion is another valuable device for getting started on a written topic. Instead of just assigning a paper on Macbeth, we can explore the valid concerns of the class, getting at specific topics which can then lead to potential thesis statements. Associated with values clarification techniques, voting and judging are preliminary techniques for data gathering. As they answer teacher-posed questions--thumbs up for yes, down for no, and arms crossed for undecided--students carefully poll the non-verbal answers of their circled classmates. Data provoked by the questions and polled by the class then become the basis for an act of writing.

Circletime

Valid in and of itself, exercise in listening skill can be another aid in pre-writing. With the class large-grouped for another assignment, a small group meets with the teacher for initial discussion of a topic which will later be written about. As the talk progresses, the teacher will stop the process to ask for one of an increasingly difficult spiral of listening skills--repetition of another's comment, paraphrase of a comment, summary of two or more comments or a summary of the discussion to that point, critical judgment of a comment, or extension of an idea based upon one's own opinion.

Skills practiced in the circletime small group can become an integral part of the teacher's expectations for class discussion, breaking down the sterile teacher-student, student-teacher dialogue by combining it with a valid student-student interchange. Thus instead of student responsibility merely for what has been said by the teacher, the student becomes responsible for total classroom

pre-writing data, with each student held responsible for everything that is said or done by every person in the class.

Sense Impressions

Familiar "getting-ready-to" exercises involve such sensory perception experiments as the taste tray--how do you describe the taste of clove or cinnamon without using the name itself? Or castor oil? Or vinegar? The imagery of textures and odors is another extension, as is the use of music.

Synaesthesia is another useful prewriting tool. Which is heavier, yellow or blue? How much does that cloud weigh? What is the shape of a musical tone?

The Poets-in-Residence Program of the Seattle Public Schools furnishes a fine example of the use of music for pre-writing experience.[1] During the 1974-75 school year, Varoujan Kodjian, associate conductor of the Seattle Symphony, invited interested Seattle students to write poetry which could be read during student performances of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5 in C Sharp Minor and Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 in F Major. Poems selected from various grade levels were then read by Lauren Friesen, a Seattle Poet-in-Residence.

1. Poetry for Symphony, Poets-in-Residence Program, Seattle Public Schools.

Notetaking

And of course there is just notetaking itself--the getting of it all out there on the paper--for which I used to use an arm-wringing gesture, "get it all out there, but only in words and phrases; anyone caught writing a complete sentence during the first ten minutes will automatically lose ten credits!" Imagine being penalized for writing a complete sentence! What a nut the parent must think that teacher to be. "No wonder his poor students can't write!" But we know the student is learning not to write too soon, not to get his process frozen into a pattern from which he will not be able to extricate himself. We are setting a task for the student which he can do and yet cannot quite do--easy and yet difficult. The student is learning to write. Ultimately he may even be able to juggle, as do we when we sit down at our typewriter to write that article for the impending deadline.

Creative Drama

And lest we avoid that often neglected domain, the psychomotor, creative dramatics provides a wealth of pre-writing experience. Specific imagery can be suggested by the way a student demonstrates a walk, any movement, a pose. Is he strutting, sneaking, stumbling, strolling, sauntering, ambling, swaggering, skipping, moping, or swinging along? As she strikes a pose, is she proud, sullen, rejecting, stubborn, intent, anxious, frightened, or confident? Let a group of students compose a tableau, in itself a preliminary exercise for the more difficult pantomime. What story does the tableau tell? In-class notetaking can lead to a writing assignment.

Preparation for an indivudual or group short story, in addition to creative dramatics--walking through a scene, deciding how some action would be done, for example--can include such activities as drawing street plans for the locale. At the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City, one can examine the voluminous drawings and notes which Sinclair Lewis made for his Work of Art--drawings, measurements, distances, descriptions. Students can have fun with and learn much from this type of pre-writing experience. Let groups of students share responsibility for various kinds of pre-writing data which will then be used as a group or class resource as they write their stories.

Journal Keeping

To build upon observation skill, journal keeping is a pre-writing habit teachers will want to encourage in their students. Complete sensory recall may be for some an instinctive gift--as in Hemingway's stories of his boyhood or Wordworth's "recollections in tranquillity"--but for the average teacher and his student, journal notation is a sensible step in one's ordering of response to what is seen, heard, touched, smelled, tasted. In junior or senior high school, many of your girls will already be keeping diaries. Without any denigration of such wholesomely self-confessional enterprise, you will want to suggest that a journal is, in part, something else--an equally enthusiastic, but perhaps more calculated attempt to transcribe observation into linear notation, with plenty of space left each time for reaction, idea, symbol, form, abstraction, or what-have-you.

With boys, especially of junior high school age, you will avoid, like exposure to bubonic plague, any possible association of journal and diary! For your more pragmatic male chauvinists, if journal keeping is a new idea, suggest notations of process, replete with evidence--pencil sketches, floorplans, breakaway diagrams, schematics, samples of material, snapshots, news clippings.

Ask your young sports enthusiasts to describe one particular situation or player in a specific action situation.[1] Let them seize upon the paradox Robert Francis reveals in his poem "Pitcher,"[2] but in such poems of Francis as "High Diver" and "The Base Stealer," emphasize for purposes of imitation the keen description rather than any metaphor they might hopefully infer for themselves. For your spectator sportsmen, you might point out that Francis himself wrote from the viewpoint of spectator rather than participant. Perhaps his very non-participation, coupled with his keen, trained sense of observation, helped Robert Francis to isolate--and lets us appreciate--his exact imagery.

Bring in examples of men's journals--Thoreau, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Burroughs--avoiding student discouragement by reminding your pupils that most of these texts represent finished products

1. Runner, a 12 min. b/w film available from the National Film Board of Canada (rental $10) is excellent motivation and introduction for this activity. W. H. Auden's commentary analyzes the act of running, and provides excellent visual preparation for Robert Francis' keen description and resultant metaphor.

2. Robert Francis, The Orb Weaver, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1960, p. 8.

rather than original notation. College libraries, city museums, and other institutions usually have some manuscripts that they will show your students. A manuscript showing work in progress, such as material in the Berg collection at the New York Public Library, is not only a good antidote for student awe with completed works, but is also a subtle argument you may call to attention when you suggest that revision is in order. If Keats could change a word, why not you?[1] A more advanced student may possibly enjoy tracing the role of journal in the writing process, as in Thoreau--from journal, to lecture, to essay.[2]

And don't overlook journal opportunities presented by field trips and other special activities. In one of the high schools of the Wappingers Central School District, English, social studies, science, mathematics and physical education are integrated in Project Adventure,[3] which takes students for day-long study in various aspects of the local community. During a winter foray, students read Jack London's "To Build a Fire" around the lunchtime campfire they themselves had made. Notes taken during the day became the basis for later written work.

1. For an excellent discussion of writing process and revision, see William Stafford's "A Way of Writing," Field, Spring 1970. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College, pp. 10-15.

2. J. Lyndon Shanley, The Making of Walden. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.

3. Project Adventure, Assistant Principal Ann Marie Mullen, Coordinator. Roy C. Ketcham High School, Myers Corners Road, Wappingers Falls NY 12590.

Free Verse

One activity which is on the borderline of writing itself allows the student to write, at least initially, in free verse form, with no capitalization, no punctuation, if the student so chooses. After the collection of data--fact, imagery, or opinion, after selecting among his data and establishing his initial ordering, the student's job at the next stage of the writing process is the content of his communication. If he has trouble with the mechanics of writing, why should he have to juggle the two oranges of content and mechanics when content alone is his prime concern? Free verse form allows him to write naturally, giving free rein to his creativity whether the ultimate goal of his communication is expository or otherwise. Each line will end when he gets into trouble!

Note how one non-academic student exploited the free verse form:

> As the fluttering wing of a butterfly
> paints the precious pattern
> of a simple thought on an untroubled mind
> a yellow rose sits solemnly
> protruding from the ruffled edges
> of an onyx vase
> contently bathing in its innocence
> while unnoticed to existence
> a jet streaks across the sky
> until sewn completely within a pocket of time

Without being judgmental as to the poetic value of this statement, I hope you would admit that it communicates grammatically. Modification is natural and functional. In line four, the end stop after solemnly establishes an adverb modification for the verb of the main clause, only to yield modification to the participle protruding, in line five. Whether or not this was accidental ambiguity initially is unimportant. Hung up on a consideration of punctuation, the doubling with solemnly would have been lost.

It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have motivated this boy to write a complex sentence demonstrating adverbial modification. And yet he wrote one!

Once having written his sentence in verse form, the student and teacher can move on to mechanical considerations, writing the sentence in normal exposition, replete with all necessary punctuation. With the content of his original intact, the only thing the student can watch his teacher destroy is that wonderful doubling of the word solemnly!

Student-Teacher Conference

As regards the interaction of teacher and student during the writing process, why wait until the paper has been written, and the damage done, before having a conference? As soon as the student has his data, a conference could be most valuable before the student finally orders his material and before he actually gets his communication frozen into form. To avoid establishing the teacher's own strictures and format, such an initial conference would find the teacher acting as a sounding board, a questioner, a provacateur rather than leader or mentor. The teacher, at this stage, can ask the questions a trained writer would ask himself, and can get the actual writing process started at the right time, keeping the student from falling into the old trap of "writing too soon too late."

Brainstorming, class discussion, listening, sense impressions, creative dramatics, journal keeping, free verse, conference: these are but a few of the many valid activities we can use with students before they write. With these and other exercises our major goal should be to condition our students to extrapolate this pre-writing behavior into their out-of-classroom lives enough so that some day they too may juggle all the oranges at once.

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